



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

ART. IV. — THE FUNCTIONS OF UNBELIEF.

MANKIND are divided by nature into believers and unbelievers almost as distinctly as they are into males and females. It is the propensity of some minds to doubt, as it is of others to have faith, and while some immediately accept, with childlike confidence, whatever is told them, others as promptly question it and demand proof. That this is not the result of wilfulness, but a constitutional trait which asserts itself instinctively, is shown by its manifestation in matters of every-day occurrence. One man will be contented with barely being told, for example, that the weather is cold or rainy, while another will ask for particulars, such as, how cold it is, or how much it is raining, and what opportunities his informant had for knowing the fact he relates. One will read a piece of news in a single newspaper, and rely upon it as true, whereas another will insist on seeing several versions of it, and even if it be favorable to his wishes, will not accept it till he has canvassed it with more or less thoroughness, and come to some kind of a conclusion respecting it other than that derived from a first impression. Wall Street veterans say that a man is a "bear" or a "bull" in stocks, not by choice, but by necessity. He has either a natural disposition to trust or a natural disposition to distrust, and operates accordingly. We need only to watch the conduct of our friends and associates to discover that the distinction is of wide prevalence, and that it holds good in all the business of life. It is true that the majority of people are naturally trustful, and that the doubters constitute the minority. The fact that false witness is forbidden by Divine commandment, and that the telling of lies is visited with social reprobation, indicates this preponderance of belief over unbelief. Were most men disposed to doubt, it would not be so great an evil to tell them untruths. They would investigate for themselves and detect the attempted imposture. But as, on the contrary, they are prone to give credence, they must be protected against being deceived. Nevertheless, the unbelievers are sufficient in number for unbelief to be an important factor in human development.

The form of unbelief which has made itself most conspicuous in all ages is that which relates to matters of religion. Most people being, as we have said, believers by nature, accept without question the religious ideas presented to them by persons they have been taught to confide in, and as religion deals with supremely important topics of life, the dissenters from established opinions in regard to it would be noticeable, even if they did no more than dissent. When, in addition, they express their doubts by the voice and by the pen, as they are prone to do, and raise all sorts of troublesome questions for believers to answer, they become also objects of dislike. It is the wind blowing against the tide, and rough water is the result. By as much as the concerns of the soul and of eternal life surpass those of the body and this world, by so much does a disturbance of what are conceived to be truths essential to one's spiritual well-being produce a disagreeable impression. It has thus come to pass among Christians, as among Mohammedans and men of all other faiths, that when a person is said to be an unbeliever, it is commonly understood that he is an unbeliever in religion, and that when unbelief is spoken of, it means unbelief of accepted religious doctrines. The odium, likewise, in which both the men and the thing are held is based almost exclusively upon their antagonism to religion, scepticism upon other subjects being little regarded. But, if unbelief is a bad thing in religion, it is bad in everything else, and if in everything else it is not bad or is even useful, it is not necessarily injurious and may be useful in religion. Believers, it is to be feared, have lost sight of this truth, and, in their vivid perception of the mischiefs wrought by unbelief, have failed to acknowledge as they ought its redeeming qualities. These, as we shall presently see, are by no means inconsiderable, and should reconcile us to its existence, though they may not commend it to our esteem.

As to the assertion often made, that unbelief is not a merely intellectual habit, but results from moral perversity, and that, if not a sin in itself, it leads to sin in other respects, it is hardly necessary to refute it. It was once a favorite argument with divines and religious writers, but latterly they have almost given it up. Indeed, they are now busy rather in repelling the accusation brought by sceptics against them, that their own principles are immoral, and the cause of immorality in practice. So far as

experience can settle the question, it shows that the lives of Benjamin Franklin, John Stuart Mill, Harriet Martineau, Theodore Parker, and other unbelievers are as little open to reproach as those of equally eminent champions of faith, while the revelations, of which we have had so many of late, proving that the profoundest religious feeling and the most decorous piety are not incompatible with pecuniary dishonesty, effectually dispose of the allegation that religion and morality are inseparable. As the Italian bravo on his way to commit a murder drops into the nearest church to implore the blessing of the Virgin Mary and the saints upon his undertaking, so the American church-member, in the midst of his embezzlements of money belonging to widows and orphans, does not intermit in the least either his family prayers or his attendance at public worship. It is not hypocrisy on the part of such men, but the simultaneous expression of two independent principles of their natures. The bravo assassinates and the dishonest trustee robs for pecuniary gain, and both engage in acts of devotion in obedience to their emotional impulses. They are none the less believers for being wicked, nor less wicked for believing. So a man may be upright in his conduct while lacking in religious faith, and neither will his integrity give him faith nor his want of faith destroy his integrity.

The precise functions of unbelief will best appear if we consider what would be the result of its suppression. Supposing that the state of affairs which many good people sigh for in regard to religion were to prevail both in regard to that and to all other subjects, and that there were no doubts, no questionings, no critical investigations, but a universal implicit acceptance of every assertion made by authorized teachers in every department of human knowledge? Would not the intellectual progress of the world come to a stand-still? If the scientific as well as the religious doctrines now held by the great majority of mankind could by some omnipotent decree be henceforth and forever shielded from objection and discussion, would not a stop be put to new discoveries? The Church of Rome did, indeed, once try the experiment, and succeeded in at least repressing the utterance of unbelief in what it had decided to be scientific as well as religious truth. It punished as a sin doubts of the Ptolemaic cosmogony as it did those of the inspiration of the Bible, and declared attacks upon the

Aristotelian philosophy to be attacks upon the foundations of faith and religion.* But to the extent that it accomplished its endeavors, it also produced a paralysis of the human intellect, and had it fully triumphed, stagnation and death would have overspread the intellectual world. Fortunately, unbelief was too strong to be thus silenced, and to its exertions we owe our present liberty. But the evil from which it delivered us then is the evil against which it guards us now, and a condemnation of it now as noxious or even as useless is ungratefully to deny its past benefits. More than this, unbelief is a conservative agency which prevents the spread of imposture and fanaticism. It has arrested the career of many an attempted fraud which would otherwise have triumphed. Without it Mormonism might have been as extensively received as Christianity, and Joanna Southcote had as many followers as Wesley. The vagaries of the Millerites might have taken their place by the side of the Thirty-nine Articles, and the wild dreams of Dr. Cumming have been received as sound expositions of prophecy. Unbelief submits to examination all these vain imaginings, and exposes their true character.

It is unquestionably vexatious to people who have made up their minds on any subject for others to come and suggest disquieting doubts, and what is more, to support those doubts by arguments which cannot be easily replied to. It is like being turned out of bed after one has settled down comfortably for a night's sleep. No wonder that in less civilized times such disturbers of the peace were treated with severity, and silenced by physical force; that the ancient Brahmans waged war with the innovating Buddhists, that the Jews stoned blasphemers to death, and that their priests crucified Christ, that Socrates was poisoned and Protagoras banished, and that the progress of Christianity during so many ages was marked with bloody persecutions of the enemies of orthodoxy. Even so late as the last century unbelief in religion was a political disability, and treated as a social crime, while the feelings with which many excellent people now regard such men as

* In 1624 three students were censured by the Faculty of Theology at Paris, and banished by the Parliament from the city, for sustaining in their theses propositions "quæ ex professo contra doctrinam Aristoteles, omnium philosophorum sine controversia principis, communemque omnium Academicorum consensum et usum militabant, et non nihil periculi adversus fidei principia involvere videbantur." — *ÉPINOIS, Procès de Galilée*, p. xix.

Arnold, Huxley, Tyndall, and Darwin in England, and Draper, Fisk, and Abbott in this country, need only stimulus and opportunity to burst forth into flames like those of Smithfield and Madrid. • They forget that they are possibly roused, not from a wholesome repose, but from a torpor that leads to death, and that the disturbance they resent may be healthful and life-giving. They fail to see, too, that the doctrines for which they are ready to contend so zealously are based upon a denial of opposing doctrines which were once defended with equal zeal, and that in religion as in science they are now enjoying the benefit of work done by the unbelievers of a former age.

In fact, it may be said that every advance which the world has made in religious enlightenment it owes to the efforts of men inspired by a sentiment of unbelief in the accepted doctrines of their time. The doubts of the Jewish populace in regard to the authority of the Scribes and Pharisees prepared the way for the teachings of Christ, and his disciples had to brave not so much popular sentiment, as the hostility of ecclesiastical magnates. Paul, in turn, assailed the cherished belief of the original twelve Apostles in regard to the obligations of the Mosaic law, and was nearly torn in pieces for it at Jerusalem by a mob of their partisans. The Roman Empire did not accept the gospel until after its philosophers, poets, and satirists had destroyed all reverence in the people for their ancient gods and goddesses, so that even the priests and augurs, when they met in the street, laughed at the traditional absurdities they continued to perform. The work, however, was not effectually done for several centuries. The historian Gibbon relates that when the Emperor Theodosius, in the year 389, sent his Christian soldiers to destroy the temple and statue of Serapis at Alexandria, they hesitated to undertake the task, fearing the vengeance of the god, and that when, finally, one of their number, bolder than the rest, mounted his colossal image with an axe, and struck off its head, they gave a sigh of relief that no earthquake followed, and that no thunderbolt fell from heaven. Indeed, they still feared that the annual fertilizing inundation of the Nile would be withheld as a punishment for the sacrilege, and the occurrence of that event as usual removed a great weight from their minds. Christianity, having been fully established, its corruptions were assailed in turn by unbelief, and the Protestant Reformation, which had its beginning

in the denial of the efficacy of indulgences, was the result. The orthodox of the present day, again, reject much that was precious in the estimation of Luther, Calvin, and Melancthon, and the process of elimination is not yet finished. Within the past few years, even, marked changes have taken place in religious opinion which are explainable only by the continued action of sceptical criticism.

To illustrate more particularly this modifying influence of unbelief upon religion, we need only recall the sentiments expressed, by the pulpits and the religious press on the occasion of the railroad disaster at Norwalk, Connecticut, in 1853, and those which have been elicited from them by recent calamities of the same character. Then there was a common cry that the terrible loss of life and limb, which plunged so many families into mourning, was an expression of Divine displeasure with the railroad company for running trains on Sundays, and the suggestion that the immediate sufferers had no part nor lot in the desecration of the Sabbath thus visited on their unlucky heads, was scorned as an argument of infidelity. Three years ago, however, the boiler of a Staten Island ferryboat exploded in New York on a Sunday afternoon, killing and maiming hundreds of Sunday pleasure-travellers; but, though the circumstances were aggravated far beyond those in the Norwalk case, no preacher nor writer of eminence ventured to suggest that God's wrath had been displayed in the occurrence. Again, when in 1865 Abraham Lincoln was shot in a theatre, his being in such a place was severely animadverted on, but the burning of the Brooklyn theatre last winter, with the loss of hundreds of lives, was suffered to pass without comment. Once, too, it was the regular practice to offer up prayers for rain in time of drought, but it so happened, not long ago, that a worthy Episcopalian bishop, having claimed a certain fall of rain as an answer to prayers to God made under his directions, he was met by the secular press with an array of news telegrams showing that this same rain-storm had caused floods which destroyed millions of dollars worth of property and many human lives. Since then we have heard little or nothing in this quarter of the world of praying for rain, and the practice here may be regarded as obsolete. These facts indicate how, under the influence of sceptical criticism, religious faith has been purged of the notion of a partial and pliable God,

and received in its stead the juster conception of a Being too wise to be taught by us and too good to dispense curses and blessings in a spirit of revenge and favoritism. That religion has gained by the change is evident, and it owes the gain to the efforts of unbelief.

No less an improvement is to be remarked in the prevalent ideas of religious people concerning their fellow-creatures. At the beginning of the present century they were taught that all human beings were under a curse which rendered them incapable of virtuous impulses or of righteous conduct, except by special dispensation from on high. The consequence was gloom and misery, a disregard of human happiness and the means that promote it, and a general harshness of behavior which made life to the tender-hearted a burden. The characteristics of a professor of religion were a sad countenance, ascetic self-denial, and a constant anxiety about his personal salvation. Some even went so far as to hold that a willingness to be damned was a prerequisite to being saved. All sorts of games and recreations were discouraged. Dancing was esteemed a deadly sin, and cards denounced as the Devil's picture-books. Even musical instruments were looked upon as snares to be avoided. Sunday was a day for strict repression of all customary employments, and marked by an unusual solemnity of deportment. Take it altogether, religion was made as uninviting and repulsive as possible, and that it now wears a more cheerful aspect is due entirely to the criticism of its former absurdities which it has received from unbelievers.

The great services which unbelief has rendered to science have already been mentioned, and they are the theme of too many tongues and pens to need further recounting here. Its benefits in political affairs are no less conspicuous. We celebrate annually the declaration of our independence of Great Britain, a step which was the outcome of a long and persistent war upon a political orthodoxy which taught that kings govern by divine right, and that the powers which be are ordained of God. Our whole political fabric is in like manner the fruit of successive rebellions against established political dogmas, and the sentiments of our most conservative citizens would appall even the radicals of Cromwell's time, and be pronounced dangerous by the moderate reformers of the last century. The same wholesome influence has modified our criminal

jurisprudence. Instead of punishing with death scores of minor offences, we enforce that penalty for murder alone, and even for that we are gradually substituting imprisonment. Sorcery and magic, which were once the pretext for so much cruelty, are treated with a wise neglect. An ermined sceptic, Sir Matthew Hale, sitting in the Court of Exchequer, put an end to the hanging of witches in England thirty years before the pious inhabitants of Massachusetts were taught by the extravagances of Salem to abolish the practice. During the whole of the controversy over the matter the advocates of the humane and enlightened view of it had to encounter the charge of being disbelievers in revealed truth, and carried their point against the combined influence of all the conservative elements of society. So, vaccination for the small-pox was introduced by questioners of the dogma that sickness and death were Divine dispensations which it was impious to seek to avoid; and the employment of ether and chloroform to mitigate the sufferings of women in childbirth owes its prevalence to the triumph of the same sagacious incredulity.

In assailing the long-cherished doctrine of the survival of the soul after the death of the body, and the continuance of its life in a future world, it would seem that unbelief had shown a wanton destructiveness which had no redeeming quality. But even in this case it has not been so useless as at first sight appears. If the doctrine of immortality be true, criticism cannot destroy its truth, but will, on the contrary, make it more apparent. In so far as unbelief, by calling it in question, teaches its advocates to demonstrate it more clearly, it does a good work; and so far as it proves it to be false, or even less well founded than is commonly supposed, it still does well. What men are concerned to know is not so much whether a life beyond the grave would or would not be a pleasant thing, but whether there be such a life at all. Unbelief does not assert that there is not, but only that there is no evidence that there is, and therefore that it is wiser for us to make the best of the life we have, and patiently await further revelations. Its criticisms have undoubtedly weakened the confidence of many in the certainty of a future existence, but they have, at the same time, diminished the abuses of which that confidence has been the cause. Instead of despising this world and its opportunities for happiness, and neglecting the blessings that lie within their reach,

men are gradually learning to do the divine will here and now, and to put into present practice those rules of conduct which they have been treating as only applicable to a future state. They see that even if there should be no heaven beyond and above this earth, it is possible to have a heaven upon the earth, by bending their energies to its creation. For, since true happiness is consistent only with obedience to the laws of our being, it is but reasonable to expect that by learning those laws and conforming to them we may attain happiness as surely in this stage of existence as in any which may be yet to come.

A similar comment may be made upon all the destructive work of unbelief. Sophistry can neither make nor unmake truth, and its efforts to demonstrate the existence of that which is not, or the non-existence of that which is, must necessarily prove futile. Sound argument alone can permanently establish any proposition, and if that argument be found to be opposed to hitherto accepted ideas, honesty requires that we acknowledge it. A cause that cannot endure assault, and to which the acknowledgment of a single defect is fatal, is not worth contending for. Religious doctrines, like all others, must necessarily partake of the imperfections of human nature, and whatever tends to correct and purify them is a benefit and not an injury. If in the process of examination some of them are found to be worthless, and are therefore rejected, it is no loss, but a gain. The discussions which are now going on so actively in Europe, and have begun to attract attention in this country, concerning the existence of a personal Deity, his work, if any, in creating and sustaining the universe, the relation between religion and ethics, the value of prayer, and all the connected class of subjects, can only tend to the final discovery and recognition of principles upon which mankind may repose with confidence. We have already seen what this process of inquiry has done in a few respects, and we may reasonably expect that its continuance will be equally useful in others.

All this, however, does not render unbelief in itself a more desirable state of mind, nor the lot of the unbeliever more enviable. He prides himself upon his enlightenment and liberty, but at what a price has he bought his so-called emancipation! The faith which to him is mere superstition is to the believer a source of unutterable peace and comfort. While he is anxiously inquiring and

investigating, and living like a stormy petrel upon a sea of perplexity and doubt, the believer is in a safe harbor taking his rest. He is forever seeking to know mysteries which cannot be revealed, neglecting the happiness that lies on the surface of things and is visible to the simple in heart. The Greek or Roman peasant, for whom every tree had its dryad and every brook its nymph, to whom the thunder was the voice of Jove and the sunshine the direct gift of Apollo, who poured out libations daily to the family deities, and offered the first fruits of the earth to Ceres and Pomona, was no less happy than the eager disputant of the Athenian schools who ridiculed his simple faith. So, the unquestioning Christian of the present day, who regards his Bible as containing the very words uttered by God, who feels that his daily life is hedged round by a supernatural guardianship, and who expects another life after this one is ended in the grave, enjoys a contentment which the sceptic may wonder at, but which he ought not to despise. Both are what they are in obedience to the laws of their mental natures, and while those laws compel them to differ in their views, neither has any right to revile the other.

THOMAS HITCHCOCK.